

Coalition seeks to create New London economic development roundtable

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New London — The Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition launched an effort Thursday to mobilize various arts, business and governmental forces throughout the city to build on employment growth at Electric Boat, expected construction of the National Coast Guard Museum and the completed citywide transformation into an all-magnet school district.

The coalition, which hosted representatives from about 75 organizations at the Fort Trumbull Conference Center, said the idea is to develop a group of perhaps four dozen people who will meet regularly for so-called New London Roundtable discussions at which ideas for projects to improve the city can be aired.

“This is a time of getting ready,” said Tammy Daugherty, the city’s director of the Office of Development and Planning, who incoming Mayor Michael Passero announced Thursday would be staying on in his new administration.

Daugherty was referring to efforts needed to prepare for the Coast Guard Museum, improve the parking situation around Electric Boat and ready facilities for an all-magnet-school district.

“We are fast becoming a regional school district,” said city Schools Superintendent Manuel Rivera. “We’re working to fundamentally improve the quality of education.”

Rivera said New London currently has about 3,200 students enrolled, with 500 of these coming from towns outside the city.

Projections for 2023, however, show enrollment jumping to 4,300, with 1,100 or so coming from outside of the district.

The city is in the middle of spending nearly \$200 million to upgrade its educational facilities, he added.

Along the way, the school system is forging partnerships with a variety of other institutions, including the Garde Arts Center, Mitchell College, Connecticut College and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

Rivera pointed out that students currently attending the city’s schools could someday be called upon to work at Electric Boat, which also has been in the midst of a growth spurt.

Catherine White, senior manager of human resources at EB, said that the company now has more than 3,500 people working in New London, and that it hired 2,100 over the past year for Connecticut and Quonset, R.I., sites.

About 650 of those hires were relocated from other parts of the country, and more than 100 now reside in New London.

She said EB expects to hire between 250 and 400 people locally every year for the next three to five years as it gears up for a two-sub-a-year delivery schedule in the near future.

Of the company’s employees in New London, White said, about half are under 35 years old.

“We look forward to being part of the growth that is happening here,” White said.

Capt. Wes Pulver, executive director of the National Coast Guard Museum, also had good news for the city.

He revealed that fundraising for the \$100 million museum is nearly a third of the way to completion and said the public in January or February of next year will get a chance to see more details of the architectural renderings.

In addition, the interior design work is now taking off, and Pulver said he expected a STEM center will be a central focus of the plans.

“We’re really excited about the support we’ve been getting,” he said.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the cultural coalition, was equally excited by the turnout for the New London Roundtable's kickoff event.

Organizations represented included Hygienic Art, the Garde Arts Center, New London Landmarks, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, New London Maritime Society, New London County Historical Society and several banks and other businesses, business groups and cultural institutions.

Bury said after the meeting that the idea is to launch an organization to foster communication among community leaders so that projects can get immediate feedback and collaboration from the community rather than requiring entrepreneurs to knock on 25 doors to get something accomplished.

"All of us here are about economic development," Bury said.

The idea, which was first implemented in Norwich earlier this year, received the immediate endorsement of City Councilor Passero, the incoming mayor.

"I'm committed to work with you," Passero said.

Preston Whiteway, chairman of the cultural coalition and executive director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, said the idea is to get key stakeholders together regularly to chart a course for New London over the next five years.

"This moment in time feels special," Whiteway said.

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